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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000894

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: POLITICAL FALLOUT OF ROH'S SUICIDE

REF: A. SEOUL 0821 (ROH COMMITS SUICIDE)
[1](#)B. SEOUL 0596 (ROH'S WIFE AND SON QUESTIONED)

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Within a day of former President Roh Moo-hyun's May 23rd suicide (ref A), Roh's supporters were blaming President Lee Myung-bak for hounding Roh to death over allegations of bribery. Roh's supporters attempted to mobilize tens of thousands of demonstrators for anti-government rallies, but the police shut down the efforts. The opposition Democratic Party (DP) will use Roh's death to extend its success in blocking the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) from carrying out its legislative agenda. Roh's suicide, shocking though it was, did not fundamentally alter the dynamics of unpopular ruling and opposition parties deadlocked over implementing a vision of Korea's future. It did, however, reveal a deep disappointment among the public over the failure of Roh's vision of a clean government working for common people based on a shared vision for the future and not the divisive regionalism of the past. End Summary.

Murderer!

[1](#)2. (C) News of former President Roh Moo-hun's suicide on May 23 sparked intense feelings of anger directed at President Lee Myung-bak. Roh's sympathizers accused Lee of conducting a politically motivated investigation into allegations that Roh had received more than US\$6 million in bribes either while in office (ref B) or immediately after leaving the Blue House, and that the prosecutors had literally hounded Roh to death. On April 30 Roh underwent the humiliation of being summoned to the prosecutor's office for questioning about his knowledge of money received by his wife and children.

[1](#)3. (U) Moon Jae-in, Roh's former Chief of Staff, said, "prosecutors had already decided Roh was guilty and then investigated him to justify their conclusion, so there is some truth in saying that this was a political killing." Kang Geum-won, CEO of Changshin Textile and a long-time Roh backer, said, "Roh died because of the prosecutors' investigation, there is no other word than murder." National Assembly Member Baek Won-woo heckled President Lee at the funeral saying, "Apologize, political murderer!"

[1](#)4. (U) Prosecutor General Lim Chae-jin, who was appointed by Roh in 2007 and who was directing the investigation into allegations of corruption against Roh, resigned under pressure on June 4. DP leaders have also demanded the resignation of the Justice Minister. Supporters of the Roh investigation noted that prosecutors did not treat Roh differently than any of his living predecessors. Former Presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo both served time in

prison for corruption and former Presidents Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-joung were investigated for corruption, subsequently their sons were convicted of taking bribes.

Mass Demonstrations Unlikely

¶15. (C) Since Roh's death on May 23rd, his supporters and anti-government leaders have attempted to organize mass rallies in central Seoul similar to the anti-government candle light vigils in May and June of 2008 that inflicted severe political wounds on President Lee. The Blue House, determined to prevent a replay, relied on a heavy police presence to prevent any large demonstrations. Riot police buses cordoned Seoul Plaza in front of City Hall, blocking access by the public from May 23 to June 4, except for a brief reprieve on May 29, the day of Roh's funeral.

¶16. (C) DP leaders railed against the government for taking anti-democratic actions to block the public's expression of its sentiments. Government supporters applauded the Lee administration's emphasis on law and order. The Constitutional Court recently upheld the Law on Assembly and Demonstration, passed in 2004 under Roh's leadership, which requires organizers to notify police 48-72 hours in advance of a demonstration -- a tool the Lee administration has effectively used to its advantage.

Political Deadlock

¶17. (C) With large-scale protests unlikely, the DP will use Roh's death to extend its success in blocking the ruling GNP from carrying out its legislative agenda. The DP delayed the reconvening of the National Assembly, set for June 1, and demanded an apology from President Lee over Roh's death. With an apology unlikely, it is not yet clear when the National Assembly will reconvene. GNP sources, are hoping for a June 15 start, but DP sources said the DP, whose primary goal is to block the GNP legislative agenda, was prepared to wait for Lee's apology. With President Lee, the GNP, and the DP scoring approval ratings of 30% or less, none of the actors has the leverage to break the deadlock.

Public's Disappointment

¶18. (C) The outpouring of sympathy over Roh's suicide far exceeds the credit the public gave him as a President. Hailing from a very poor family, Roh was a self-made man without a college degree in an elitist society that values formal education. His home town in Gyeongsang Province near Busan was a conservative stronghold but Roh was a progressive politician who made his name as a champion of labor rights. Above all, Roh stood for cleaning up politics, doing away with regionalism, and reconciling with the North. This vision captured the imagination of the Korean public and catapulted him to the presidency. That by his own admission he failed to fulfill his vision does not diminish the public's support for the kind of politics he promised. Among many Koreans there is a lasting desire to see Roh's political promises fulfilled.
STEPHENS